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Vergil's Aeneid: The Cornerstone of Roman Identity

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VERGIL'S *AENEID:* THE CORNERSTONE OF ROMAN IDENTITY

By Makyra Williamson

Written between 29 and 19 BC, the *Aeneid* still stands as one of the greatest pieces of epic literature. Many classic works of literature take years to influence their culture, but the *Aeneid* is unique in that it "was quickly canonized as a school text by the grammarians."[1] It was assimilated into Roman culture and has not left the canon since Augustus first ordered its publication after Vergil's death.[2] It served as the ultimate example of polished and sophisticated Latin grammar and earned Vergil the reputation of the ultimate Latin grammarian. The epic's influence did not remain in the ancient world; according to Clarke, "he is one of the very few Latin writers whose work remained known, without any real break, from the day that it was written until now."[3] The *Aeneid* had an immediate effect on Roman culture, and now, two thousand years later, has left an indelible mark on literature and culture alike.

In 70 BC, Vergil was born to a middle-class family as a Roman citizen.[4] He lived near Mantua in the province of Cisalpine Gaul, an area in the Po valley that reached the Alps.[5] During his adolescence, Julius

[1] Craig Kallendorf, *In Praise of Aeneas: Virgil and Epideictic Rhetoric in the Early Italian Renaissance* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1989), 3.

[2] Vergil is also commonly spelled Virgil. For the purposes of this paper, the poet's name will be spelled "Vergil" in order to keep with the Latin spelling of his full name: Publius Vergilius Maro.

[3] A. K. Clarke, "The Scope of Virgil's Influence," *Greece & Rome*, 16, no. 46 (Jan. 1947): 8.

[4] Peter Levi, *Virgil: His Life and Times* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1998), 13-14.

[5] Ibid., 13.

Caesar attained a position in the consulship, became the governor of several provinces, including Vergil's Cisalpine Gaul, and began conquering and building an empire. The senate retracted Caesar's command in 49 BC, a decision promptly followed by civil war, and Caesar went on to conquer Pompey and his successors in Italy, Greece, Egypt, Africa, and Spain.[6] During this time, Vergil remained fairly insulated from the wars and Roman politics, and Levi states that he "had no ambition as a lawyer or as a senator."[7]

Caesar died in 44 BC, and in November of the following year, Augustus became consul.[8] However, Vergil still stayed removed from the throes of political conflict and turmoil. As Starr remarks, Vergil's life "was a relatively uneventful one."[8] Starting in approximately 39 BC, he lived in Rome or near Naples, and Maecenas and Augustus supported him both financially and artistically.[10] Maecenas, a wealthy aristocratic Etruscan, provided connections and networking opportunities for Vergil, as Maecenas had been connected first to Caesar, then to Augustus, whom he served as an advisor.[9] In fact, according to Probus, Vergil met Octavian through Maecenas in approximately 40 BC.[10] Despite his removal from the political scene, Vergil did not lack friends; according to Suetonius' sketch of the poet's life, he actually turned down Augustus when he offered him the property of a man who went into exile. He did not need it, for "he possessed nearly ten million sesterces from the generous gifts of friends."[13]

The *Aeneid* centers around Aeneas, a Trojan warrior and the namesake of the epic. Why did Vergil choose a Trojan main character for

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[6] Ibid., 23.

[7] Levi, 24.

[8] Chester G. Starr, "Virgil's Acceptance of Octavian," *The American Journal of Philology*, 76, no. 1 (1955): 34.

[9] John Carter, Introduction to *The Roman History: The Reign of Augustus*, Cassius Dio, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (NY: Penguin Books, 1987), 27.

[10] Ibid.

his work to glorify Augustus? The answer lies in Vergil's motives for writing the piece. Toll argues that Vergil saw a need for a sense of national identity and shaped the *Aeneid* to provide that Roman identity.[11] Thanks to a seventy-year series of civil wars, Vergil wrote during a tumultuous period in Roman Italy. As Toll puts it, "the nation of Roman Italians was still embryonic."[12] With conflict and upheaval around every corner, Rome needed a tangible manifestation of national identity. Vergil provided this by taking the existing myths about Rome's foundation and weaving "strands of contemporary Roman history into his literary tapestry."[13] By creating a cohesive narrative that described Rome's foundation and linking it to the gods themselves, Vergil established a piece of literature that encapsulated ideas already present in Roman culture. The crystallized version of these myths provided a more tangible hub for Roman nationalism. Through mythology, odes to Augustus, and snide comments about the Greeks, Vergil gave the Romans what they wanted: an epic that made them equal to and greater than the Greeks. According to Putnam, Vergil's Roman peers would have dated the events of the *Aeneid* to approximately three hundred years before Rome's foundation, which is traditionally dated 753 BC.[17] This dating allowed the Romans to grasp more readily at the concepts portrayed, because the facts were shrouded in the mists of time. The past was theirs to reinvent and Vergil's to memorialize.

The *Aeneid* tells the tale of Aeneas, a Trojan warrior who leaves his destroyed land behind in search of a new home. He embarks on a

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[11] Katharine Toll, "Making Roman-Ness and the 'Aeneid'," *Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (April 1997), 34.

[12] Ibid., 35, 39.

[13] Kimberly K. Bell, "*Translatio* and the Constructs of a Roman Nation in Virgil's *Aeneid*," *Rocky Mountain Review* (2008): 11. [17] Michael C.J. Putnam, "Vergil's *Aeneid* and the Evolution of Augustus," in *Approaches to Teaching Vergil's Aeneid*, eds. William S. Anderson and Lorina N. Quartarone (New York, NY: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 114.

variety of adventures over seven years and eventually settles in Latium. The twelve-book poem begins with Aeneas and his fleet getting scattered by a storm. Aeneas and seven of his ships land in Africa, where they are met by Venus, Aeneas' divine mother, who tells him to go to Queen Dido. Aeneas follows her instruction, arrives in Carthage, finds his companions, and meets Queen Dido. He tells her about the Trojan horse and Venus' revelation about the gods' part in the fall of the city and how divine signs from Pallas had led the Trojans to sail away.[14] Aeneas explains how the Aeneadae (Aeneas and his followers) have unsuccessfully attempted to make homes in Thrace and Crete. Throughout their journey, they talked with characters like Hector's wife and a man from Ulysses' crew.

Dido falls in love with Aeneas, and thanks to collaboration between Juno and Venus, the two become lovers. The relationship lasts until Mercury reminds Aeneas of his mission and Aeneas leaves Carthage. Dido, wounded by Aeneas' refusal to stay, stabs and kills herself. Aeneas sails away and sees the fire from Dido's funeral pyre but does not know its source. A storm forces the Aeneadae to stop at Sicily, where they hold the Trojan games to mark the anniversary of Aeneas' father's death. After the festivities, Iris takes human form and incites the Trojan women to set the fleet on fire, destroying four ships. The Aeneadae go to Italy, where Aeneas visits the Sibyl. She prophesies and Aeneas follows her to the underworld. There, they cross Acheron and visit the Fields of Mourning, where Aeneas sees Dido's spirit and learns of her suicide. Then, they visit Elysium, where Aeneas sees his father and receives a new prophecy.

Next, the Aeneadae travel to the Tiber and meet with King Latinus, who promises his daughter Lavinia to Aeneas. However, Juno stirs up a revolt. War spreads like wildfire, and Juno opens the Gates of War. After a prophecy from the river-god Tiber, Aeneas goes upstream to ask King Evander for support in the war. When Aeneas and his men

[14] Vergil *Aeneid* 2.176

arrive, Evander gives Aeneas a tour of the site of the future city of Rome. He also grants Aeneas' request for reinforcements. Venus meets Aeneas and Pallas in Etruria and gives Aeneas armor fashioned by Vulcan. The shield of the magical set depicts "work beyond telling of. There the god of fire had etched Italian history and Roman triumphs, from the prophecies he knew: all of Ascanius' line to come."[15] Meanwhile, Iris is wreaking havoc on Aeneas' troops yet again. Provoked, Turnus and his men attack the Trojans while Aeneas is gone, but when the Trojans do not come out, focused their wrath on the fleet. The Italians attempt another attack the next day, this time bearing the heads of two Trojan boys who were caught spying on the Italian camp. War erupts once more. The fighting stalls until Aeneas returns with reinforcements and breaks the blockade of the Trojan camp. Pallas, a Trojan, is killed in battle. The Trojans take the battlefield and the warring sides declare a twelve-day truce for burial rites. While the Latins discuss their next move, the Trojans advance and the battle breaks out again.

In the final book of the *Aeneid*, Turnus, one of the Italian warriors, decides to duel Aeneas, but flees after their duel begins. He eventually surrenders. Aeneas intends to let Turnus live, but remembers that Turnus had killed Pallas: "Incensed, he thrust the sword through Turnus' chest. His enemy's body soon grew cold and helpless, while the indignant soul flew down to Hades."[16] With these lines, the *Aeneid* rather abruptly concludes.[17] Tradition states that Vergil meant to spend another three years perfecting his epic, but died before he could do so. Distraught and dying, he pleaded to burn the manuscript, but did not get his wish. After his death, the poem was distributed.[18] Perhaps the sudden ending relates

[15] Vergil *Aeneid* 8.625-628

[16] Vergil *Aeneid* 12.950-52

[17] Information in this summary was drawn from: Kenneth Quinn, *Virgil's Aeneid: A Critical Description* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), 99-252; and Vergil *Aeneid.*

[18] H. M. Gass, "Roman Virgil," *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 38, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec., 1930), 425.

to Vergil's desire for the epic to be burned as something too unpolished to be read.

It is impossible to read the *Aeneid* without noticing the connection between it and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey.* The *Aeneid* and Homer's epics form a trifecta of ancient literature, epics that tell tales of war and peace, gods and men. In the *Aeneid,* Vergil draws on Greek themes and characters and blatantly Romanizes them. The resulting epic molded Roman national identity into a cohesive narrative.

Quinn notes that Vergil "had sailed as close as possible to plagiarism," but argues that the *Aeneid* is a success because "he has transcended Homer's objective."[19] However, Lewis finds the practice of comparing Vergil to Homer "a silly habit" that occurs "partly as the result of romantic primitivism" and says the differences between the two writers "begin to appear on the very first page of the *Aeneid*."[20] The accusation that Vergil focused on Homer's work too much is not a new one. Macrobius wrote that Vergil "goes too far in his excessive fondness for Homer….He keeps his keen gaze focused on Homer with the goal of imitating not just his grandeur but also his straightforwardness, the vividness of his speech, and his quiet majesty."[21] Suetonius agreed, writing: "Last of all he began the 'Aeneid,' a varied and complicated theme, and as it were a mirror of both of the poems of Homer; moreover it treated Greek and Latin personages and affairs in common, and contained at the same time an account of the origin of the city of Rome and of Augustus, which was the poet's special aim."[22]

Yet, it is intriguing to note that the value of the *Aeneid* is increased rather than diminished by its roots in Homer and Greek

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[19] Kenneth Quinn, *Virgil's "Aeneid"*, 52.

[20] C. S. Lewis, "Virgil and the Subject of Secondary Epic," in *Virgil*, ed. Steele Commager (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1966), 63.

[21] Macrobius *Saturnalia* 5.40

[22] Suetonius *Lives of Illustrious Men. Poets. Virgil.* 21-22.

mythology. Otis argues that Vergil did "set out to write an *Odyssey-Iliad*."[23] However, Vergil's epic is much more than a Romanized Homeric, though he obviously admired and drew from Homer. The Greek themes and ideas Vergil used as fuel actually enhance the value of his poem, for they place Roman heritage on par with Greek heritage and justify a sense of national superiority.

The main character and namesake of Vergil's poem is Aeneas, who first appeared in Homer's *Iliad* as, "Aeneas, whom fair Aphrodite conceived to Anchises amid the spurs of Ida, a goddess couched with a mortal man."[24] Vergil takes this main character and translates his backstory to the Roman equivalent, replacing Aphrodite with Venus, the Roman goddess of love. As Levi points out, Vergil chose to center his epic around "the only Roman hero who meshed with the Iliad and the fall of Troy."[25] Lineage is not the only parallel with the Homeric epics. After the Trojan war, Aeneas and his men sail in search of a new land, with the gods guiding their every step—much like Homer's Odysseus. The difference lies in that Odysseus returned home, whereas Aeneas had to discover a home. Obvious as these parallels may seem, scholars still debate their significance. Haecker argues that Aeneas does not resemble Odysseus in the slightest, because Aeneas travelled away from his home, and Odysseus returned to his.[26] However, the difference in direction does not negate the similarities between the two characters.

The idea that the Romans descended from the Trojans did not originate with Vergil. Rather, he drew on the ideas of early Greek writers that made Aeneas the founder of Rome. Before the *Aeneid*, Aeneas already had a reputation as the son of Venus and father of the Roman

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[23] Brooks Otis, "The Originality of the Aeneid," in *Virgil*, ed. D. R. Dudley, (NY: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1969), 28.

[24] Homer *Iliad* 2.820-21.

[25] Levi, 223.

[26] Theodore Haecker, "Odysseus and Aeneas," in *Virgil*, ed. Steele Commager (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 68.

race. Titus Lucretius Carus, an Epicurean, lived c. 94-55 BC, well before Vergil penned the *Aeneid*. In his Invocation to Venus, he began by saying, "Mother of Aeneas and his race, delight of men and gods, life-giving Venus…"[27] The concept of divine origin plays a critical role in Roman self-esteem. By having Aeneas born to Venus, the Roman goddess of love, Vergil used the *Aeneid* to inject "into the mythical past the origin of certain historical institutions of his own day" and give the Romans a heritage they could be proud of.[28]

Another example of the Vergil turning myth into legend appears in the Game of Troy, which is established in Book V of the *Aeneid.* Vergil did not originate the idea of the Trojan games. Julius Caesar "seems to have been the first to identify the game [of Troy] with the city" in order to highlight Roman descent from the Trojans—and Caesar's descent from Aeneas.[29] The story said that Ascanius-Iulus, Aeneas' son, participated in the games and passed the tradition on to the Romans.[30] Yet again, Vergil adopted and adapted a myth surrounding Rome's legacy and solidified it into a tangible written form.

The Roman religion receives an interesting treatment in the *Aeneid.* In many ways, it appears that the Greek gods have simply been varnished with Roman characteristics. In Bailey's discussion of Vergil's use of religion, he splits the Roman gods into three categories: gods with Greek names, gods with Greek and Roman names, and gods with Roman names. Many of the gods were based on a Greek idea, and though their characteristics were Romanized, their names did not change. This was true of gods such as Apollo, Cybele, Aeolus, and Iris. Some gods had titles in both languages: Liber-Bacchus, Pallas-Minerva, and Faunus-Pan. Other gods had become fully drawn into the Roman canon, name and all.

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[27] Lucretius *Invocation to Venus* 1.

[28] Henry T. Rowell, *Rome: In the Augustan Age*,166.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Rowell, 166-67.

These gods included Ceres, Mars, and Neptunus.[31] The *Aeneid* did not necessarily create these ideas, but it indicates the thought of its era—a fluidity between Greek and Roman religious concepts.

The translation of Homeric ideas into the *Aeneid* helped establish Vergil's work, as yet another instance of the similarity between the epics appears in sections concerning the underworld. In Book XI of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus made sacrifices, conversed with several of his dead companions, and prayed "to might Hades and dread Persephone."[32] Likewise, in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, before entering the underworld, Aeneas had a priest make sacrifices and call "on Hecate, strong in hell and heaven" before he went to the underworld.[33]

Aeneas and Odysseus share another quality in common: a weakness for women. Homer's *Odyssey* discusses Odysseus' dilemma when he stays with the goddess Circe, who had turned his men into swine. Odysseus went to her house and convinced her to turn his men back into humans, but even after this, his party remained with her for an entire year before they moved to follow the quest that the gods gave Odysseus: to go to Hades.[34] Vergil's hero, Aeneas, had a similar experience when Dido of Carthage fell in love with him and trapped him into what she considered a marriage. Mercury visited Aeneas on behalf of Jove and admonished him for "forgetting your own kingdom that awaits you."[35] After that, Aeneas devised a plan to steal away, but he failed. Dido confronted him and when Aeneas refused to stay with her, Dido became so distraught that she committed suicide and Aeneas saw the smoke from her pyre as he sailed away.[36] In both instances, the hero

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[31] Cyril Bailey, *Religion in Virgil* (NY: Barnes & Noble, Inc. 1935/1969), 103-181.

[32] Homer *Odyssey* 11.47

[33] Vergil *Aeneid* 6.247

[34] Homer *Odyssey* 10

[35] Vergil *Aeneid* 4.267

[36] Ibid. 4

of the story stayed with a woman and forgot about his mission until the plan of the gods intervened.

Vergil intentionally discusses points of contention between the Trojans and the Greeks, especially pertaining to the Trojan War that drove Aeneas and his men from the city. The *Aeneid* discusses how they "cursed Ulysses' motherland."[37] When Aeneas tells the tale of being routed from Troy, he reflects on the infamous Trojan horse: "Hear how the Greek plot worked: this single crime shows them for what they all are."[38] Vergil paints the Trojan horse as an act of cowardice and Hector's military prowess as admirable. Throughout the *Aeneid,* he elaborates on points of animosity between the Greeks and Romans to create a stronger sense of solidarity among the Romans. A shared enemy makes friends out of foes.

Though the *Aeneid* portrayed Rome's history, it also served as a representation of the Augustan era. Vergil wrote it as an Augustan, that is, an epic about Augustus intended to glorify him.[39] The Augustan Age served as the catalyst and the watermark that made the *Aeneid* successful. Augustus requested that Vergil write something to honor him, and Vergil combined strands of mythology with praise of Augustus in the epic. On September 2, 31 BC, Augustus achieved victory over Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra at the infamous battle of Actium. This battle led to Roman control of Egypt, and, at last, Roman peace had been accomplished and the Temple of Janus closed its doors. [40] This was no small feat, and it marked the beginning of Augustus' control over Rome. Cassius Dio, a Greek historian, wrote, "at this point for the first time Octavian alone held all the power of the state in his hands, and

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[37] Ibid. 3.273

[38] Ibid. 2.65-66

[39] Karl Galinsky "Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as World Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus,* ed. Karl Galinsky (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 344.

[40] Rowell, 13. [45]

accordingly the calculation of the years of his reign should, strictly speaking, be made from that day."[41] Therefore, one of the most important elements in the *Aeneid*'s portrayal of Roman history is Aeneas' shield, forged by the fires of Vulcan. This shield portrayed the future of Rome: Romulus and Remus, the Sabine women, and, most importantly, Actium: The bronze-braced fleets at Actium, in the middle, were lined up there to see. All of Leucate was seething with them. Gold shone on the waves. Caesar Augustus led the Roman forces— Senate and people, hearth gods, mighty sky gods.[42]

The battle of Actium served as the summit of Augustus' achievements that are discussed in the epic: here, Augustus is seen in his triumphant glory. For the first 150 years of his existence, Vergil was greatly admired. Wiliams argues that this is because the *Aeneid* served as the Roman national poem, but also because of Vergil's technical virtuosity.[43] He was regarded as the master of the Latin language, and partially because of this, his works became the grammar texts of schoolchildren in Latium.

In a letter to Augustus, Horace summed up the Roman view of Vergil: "Alexander was a good judge of painting and sculpture, but in poetry his taste was Boeotian, for he paid the wretched Choerilus for his poor verses. You, on the contrary, have chosen Virgil and Varius to sing your exploits, and you know that no sculptor reproduces the features of heroes more faithfully than the poet does their souls."[44] Horace concludes his letter by deferring his own modest talent to Vergil's expertise. "If I could do so, I should much prefer to sing your praises, but you are worthy of a greater poet."[45]

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[41] Cassius Dio *Rome* 51.1.

[42] Vergil *Aeneid* 675-689

[43] R. D. Williams, "Changing Attitudes to Virgil A study in the history of taste from Dryden," in *Virgil*, ed. D. R. Dudley (NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1969), 120-21.

[44] Horace *Epistles II: To Augustus* 1.219-250

[45] Horace *Epistles II: To Augustus* 1.250-270

Vergil's influence did not end with the fall of the Roman empire; it reaches into the literature of the next millennium. Dante Alighieri was born in 1265 AD and died in 1321 AD. A poet, native of Florence, and admirer of Vergil, he is most famous for *The Divine Comedy*. In this work, Dante uses himself as the main character and makes the poet Vergil as a character that acts as his guide. The first section, *Commedia*, begins with Dante "searching through a dark wood, the right way blurred and lost" and running for his life.[46] Then, Dante finds Vergil and, in awe of his poetic idol, pleads for Vergil's help in escaping danger. Seeing Dante's distress, Vergil agrees, "Therefore, considering what's best for you, I judge that you should follow, I should guide, and hence through an eternal space lead on."[47] Vergil then serves as Dante's guide "through Hell and up the mountain of Purgatory."[48]

Dante's work is significant in this discussion because it demonstrates that, more than a thousand years after Vergil's life, another poet chose to incorporate him into a major undertaking that served as cutting edge commentary on Christianity and the nature of the afterlife. The *Aeneid* did far more than simply make an impression on the people of its own time. The epic provided a sense of national identity, but also served as a work of art that allowed other writers and thinkers to engage with it about identity, faith, and more. Vergil did not write a one-hit wonder; he wrote a poem that has influenced thought for thousands of years.

Still, Vergil's epic had not finished influencing culture. Williams addresses this in his discussion of the English Augustan Age, which he defines as "the Neo-Classical period beginning with Dryden and

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[46] Dante *Divine Comedy* Canto 1.2-3, 1.28-60.

[47] Dante *Divine Comedy* 1.112-114

[48] Kevin Brownlee, "Dante and the Classical Poets," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante,* ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 143.

stretching well on into the eighteenth century."[49] Dryden, too, respected Vergil's work immensely. He admired the ethical aspects of the *Aeneid*, and he saw in it a past reflection of his personal perspectives. In the *Aeneid*, Dryden "found…the public voice of Rome."[50] Vergil's legacy through the *Aeneid* has continued for century upon century, irreversibly shaping the western world.

The *Aeneid*'s legacy influenced Roman nationalism, but it did not end there. Through his epic, Vergil influenced the works of Dante, Dryden, and more. He created a tangible literary work that crystallized the myths swirling around Rome's foundation and attached them to Rome's ruler, Augustus. Through the *Aeneid*, Vergil exalted Augustus and created a written source for his divinity. Vergil adopted Homer's concepts and brought them into a different context, successfully utilizing another poet's themes in his own work. He defined Roman nationalism, glorified Augustus, and provided a window into the bridge between Greek and Roman concepts. Vergil has earned his reputation as one of the greatest poets of all time.

[49] R. D. Williams, "Changing Attitudes to Virgil A study in the history of taste from Dryden,"123.

[50] Williams, 125.